

Opinion **Instant Insight**

Kamala Harris has the measure of Donald Trump

The vice-president won the debate and shut down lingering fears of her inadequacy for the fight ahead

EDWARD LUCE



Donald Trump, left, and Kamala Harris shake hands before their first and possibly only debate on Tuesday © Brian Snyder/Reuters

Edward Luce in Washington 9 HOURS AGO

If there were any doubts that Kamala Harris could stand up to Donald Trump they were dispelled in [their first encounter](#) on Tuesday night. It may be their last. The fact that Harris ended the debate by calling for another one spoke volumes. We shall see if Trump risks a second encounter in the next 55 days until the election.

By any objective measure Harris won the debate — even some Fox News pundits called it a bad night for Trump. Whether America's median voter will agree is another matter. Hillary Clinton was judged to have won her stand-offs with Trump in 2016. That did not save her at the ballot box.

Under the circumstances, Harris did better than that. Forget Taylor Swift's [post-debate endorsement](#) (though given her reach that might be hard to do); celebrity blessings rarely shift the dial. Harris shut down lingering fears of her inadequacy for the fight.

Even during the peak of Harris's triumphalist convention in Chicago last month, delegates confessed to fears about her looming encounter with Trump. Amid the customary bravado about how their candidate would romp home, Democrats could not disguise a gnawing dread about Harris's upcoming clash — indeed her first-ever meeting — with Trump. Her history as a debater includes both failures and

home runs.

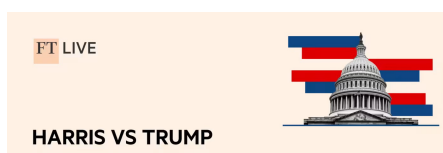
Tuesday night could have been disastrous. It was at the very least a good 90 minutes for Harris. She has probably arrested the drift in momentum. It is worth stressing the likely course of history had it been Joe Biden, not Harris, who took the stage on Tuesday night.

Not for the first time, Democrats can thank the rain gods that Biden pushed for an early debate in June. That gave them the time to pressure Biden to step down after he floundered. With Harris, Democrats have a reasonable chance of winning. With Biden, they were heading for defeat.

It is also worth highlighting what Harris got right in her clash with Trump. Her most important feat was to avoid living up to her caricature — as the constantly laughing, vacuously ambitious woman, out of her depth and unable to finish a coherent sentence. None of those alleged traits were on display.

Harris began the debate in evident nervousness. Within about 20 minutes, she visibly loosened up. She was frequently able to get under Trump's skin. By mentioning his smaller crowd sizes and the claim that the world's dictators, especially Vladimir Putin, craved his victory, Harris riled Trump.

The one piece of advice that Trump's advisers and campaign officials reportedly kept emphasising was that he should not lose his cool. Harris found ways of ensuring he did. You could almost hear the collective groan at Trump HQ when he mentioned that illegal immigrants were eating people's pet dogs — an internet meme that will instantly enter disinformation's hall of fame — or when he was depicting the January 6 rioters as martyrs. It is harder to understand why Trump did not prepare the semblance of a plan for what he would put in place of Obamacare.



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After being pressed by the moderators, Trump replied: "I have concepts of a plan. I'm not president right now." In a pre-Trumpian debate, such an answer would have entered the annals. I doubt it will change anybody's view in 2024. Trump has had nine years to come up with a replacement for what he has repeatedly depicted as a terrible healthcare law. Even semi-informed voters are years past

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expecting him to do so.

It will take a while to test whether Harris's performance registers with America's voters. But she will reap psychological upsides straight away. These will probably include a boost of self-confidence in her ability to win this election. As Harris's call for another debate conveyed, she will also be readier to take tough questions from the media and others.

Yet there is no escaping America's stubborn polarisation or the steeper climb that Harris has to make to win the Electoral College. She needs a four- or five-point lead nationally to be confident of taking key swing states. Trump could easily win this election from behind.

For the time being, however, America's election story has changed. Doubtless it will shift again, as America is predictably volatile. But those who questioned Harris's ruthlessness for the task will now be silenced.

Proof of that is how she spoke about Biden, who is still her boss and benefactor. She was almost brutal in her consistent distancing from Biden, who remains president for another five months. "You are running against me, not against Biden," Harris told Trump. The viewer would have needed no reminding.

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